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Children and screen time – How much is too much?

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Electronic media, especially television, is increasingly a part of our children's daily lives – beginning when they're babies. While many parents are limiting the amount of screen time their children have, most of us are unaware of what constitutes too much screen time and why too much screen time is harmful.

Some researches emphatically denounce television for children, especially the youngest ones. Consider these opinions:

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under age 2 watch no television while children age 2 and older are limited to no more than two hours of daily viewing.

Daily television viewing for two or more hours in early childhood can lead to behavioral problems and poor social skills. – Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

In a study of preschoolers, ages 1 to 4, a child's risk of being overweight increased by 6 percent for every hour of television watched a day. If that child had a TV in his bedroom, the odds of being overweight jumped an additional 31 percent for every hour watched. Preschool children with TVs in their bedroom watched an additional 4.8 hours of TV or videos every week. – Dr. Barbara Dennison

Research indicates that for every hour of television children watch each day, their risk of developing attention-related problems later increases by 10 percent. For example, if a child watches three hours of television each day, the child would be 30 percent more likely to develop attention deficit disorder. – Pediatrics magazine.

The more TV preschoolers watch, the less well they do



academically in the first grade. Also, the more TV preschoolers watch, the less well-socialized they are in the first grade. – “Effects of Preschool Television Watching on First-Grade Children” – Journal of Communication

According to “Zero to Six: Electronic Media in the Lives of Infants, Toddlers and Preschoolers,” children 6 and under spend an average of two hours a

day using screen media, about the same amount of time they spend playing outside, and well over the amount they spend reading or being read to (39 minutes).

Children in households where the TV is on “always” or “most of the time” are less likely to read than are children in other homes. – Zero to Six.

Three-quarters of very young children in America live in homes where the television is on most of the time, according to researchers at the University of Massachusetts. In fact, the Zero to Six study showed that one in four children under the age of 2 has a TV in his or her bedroom.

The Massachusetts researchers discovered that background TV disrupted the toy play of the children at every age, even when they paid little attention to it. When the television was on, the children played for significantly shorter periods of time and the time they spent focused on their play was shorter.

But not everyone agrees that television for preschoolers is all bad.

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“Sweeping condemnations of television ignore the obvious fact that television contains an enormous variety of forms and content,” says Aletha C. Huston, Ph.D., director of the Center For Research On The Influences Of Television On Children in Texas. Their study provides “strong support for the notion that the effects of television viewing depend on program content and genre.”

Huston and colleagues analyzed the television-viewing habits of nearly 200 children aged 2 to 7 over a three-year period. The children, all from low- to moderate-income families, were also given periodic tests of their reading, math, vocabulary and school-readiness skills. Researchers focused on low- to moderate-income families because these families have been underrepresented in previous research, they tend to watch TV frequently and many educational programs are targeted at them.

According to the study, very young children who spent a few hours a week watching educational programs such as Sesame Street, Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood, Reading Rainbow, Captain Kangaroo, Mr. Wizard’s World and 3-2-1 Contact had higher academic test scores 3 years later than those who didn’t watch educational programs. But children who watched many hours of entertainment programs and cartoons had lower test scores than those who watched fewer hours of such programs.

The positive effects of educational programming were strongest for children aged 2 and 3. “Good educational programs can provide lasting benefits to children at many ages, but it may be especially important to provide such fare for very young children because they are less likely

than older children to be exposed to formal preschool instruction, and because stable habits of viewing may be formed in the first few years of life,” Huston says.

Children and adults watch television because it’s fascinating, entertaining and requires no effort by the viewer. Many parents do believe that television is educational or good for their child’s brain, that it is enjoyable or relaxing. But a significant factor in the amount of television children watch is directly related to adult needs – TV gives the parent time to get things done in the house while the child is entertained.

Adding to the dialogue on the impact of television on children are the commercials. Not only are children greatly influenced by advertisements for toys, they’re also influenced by food commercials.

According to a study by the University of Liverpool, obese and overweight children increase their food intake by more than 100 percent after watching food advertisements on television. Food intake following the food commercials was significantly higher compared with the toy commercials in all weight groups, with obese children showing the highest consumption.

The amount of information on screen time is almost overwhelming, and some of it is contradictory. So, in a nutshell, how much television should your child watch? There’s no one answer, but the majority of research suggests that babies should have no television and older children should have strict limitations on screen time.

You might want to adopt one of these adages – “When in doubt, do without” or “Everything in moderation, nothing to excess.”